

WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?

October 20, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Genesis 1:26-31

Matthew 25:14-30

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image...and let them have dominion'..."
-Genesis 1:26 (NSRV)

Ah, Stewardship. The Sunday we all love to hate. The time when the preacher gets to make everyone squirm with only slightly outrageous comparisons between what is and what could be; statements like... "the average gift to the church wouldn't buy dinner for two at the Four Seasons." Actually, we're pretty good - it's up to dinner for four now. You used to be able to say things like "if we'd only give to the church the same amount of money we are spending on cigarettes." But nobody is smoking these days and so no one knows how expensive a pack of cigarettes has become and how much money the church would end up with under that rubric. So, cigarettes are out, but the lottery is in - just a ticket a day.

An Anglican Diocese in Canada came up with a psychologically sound way to get church people to ventilate all the negative feelings they had accumulated about religious fund-raising over the years. They used focus groups and distributed blank slips of paper and asked participants to write down the first words that came to mind when they heard the word "Stewardship." They were astonished. The participants said things like:

"Oh, no!"

"Not again"

"Money"

"Dammit"

and other responses, far too imaginatively earthy to be included here. [The Steward, A Biblical Symbol Come of Age, Douglas John Hall, p. 16]

That vignette is in a book by one of the brightest and best thinkers writing theology today, Douglas John Hall, who teaches at McGill University. The title of the book is The Steward, A Biblical Symbol Come of Age, and it is anything but a church fund raising manual. In fact, Hall has little time for what he calls "beating the drum for God and money" which is how he describes most of what goes on in churches on this occasion. "Instead of periodic efforts at conjuring up deeds of stewardship; instead of financial campaigns and bazaars and garage sales; instead of cajoling and harping and begging people... we need to learn how to teach and preach the gospel and interpret the Christian life as Stewardship." [p. 243-244]

So, this will not be a money-raising sermon. But before you relax, let me warn you that the more I have thought about Stewardship as a relevant Biblical symbol for all of life, the more I hear what I am deeply convinced is the word of God to us, here in this time and this place, the more it feels to me like a very expensive undertaking; that you and I are summoned, invited, called, ordered, by God, to respond with a whole lot more than 5.7% of our disposable income, after taxes of course.

The provocative futurist, Jeremy Rifkin, thinks that the future of the human race depends on a "fundamental shift in humanity's frame of reference... a new set of governing principles for how human beings behave and act in the world." We must, in order to survive, Rifkin proposes, replace the notion of using, consuming, owning, and discarding with notions of conserving, protecting, nurturing, and sharing. And the word Rifkin chooses for this radical shift in the way we think and behave is, curiously, Stewardship. [Emerging Order, p. 270 - In Hall, p. 240]

The key concept is responsibility. The critical question is "Who's In Charge Here?" and it has to do, actually, not so much with our wallets and bank accounts, as with our souls, our being itself. And that matter is addressed in our faith tradition in the first story in the Bible, the story of responsibility given and refused.

From the beginning, the Bible says that human beings are the crown of creation. From the beginning, human beings are given the job of ruling, deciding, guiding the creation project. It is fashionable today to criticize that Biblical notion as terribly anthropocentric, and to blame the Biblical notion of humankind's dominion over the earth for everything from acid rain to the Exxon Valdez disaster to farming and harvesting the skins of little furry animals. Clearly, if human beings have dominion over creation, we have botched the job. And so, from many sources today, comes the proposal that we should give up the dominion business and affirm our harmony with the creation and our place in the whole family of life, as one participant, not necessarily

the dominant one, the messiest one obviously, the one endangering the whole enterprise, but not the most important one. It is important for us to hear it and to learn from it - but also to understand that there is a different Biblical prescription here. We are the responsible ones in the story. We are the ones God addresses and who have the capacity to know God and in our freedom and ingenuity the capacity to put things out of balance to mess things up. The dominion given the human beings in the creation story is not the freedom to exploit, consume, discard and despoil, but rather the dominion of the shepherd - the protection and preservation and just management of the enterprise.

The faith word is not that human dominion has ruined creation, but that unwise, unjust, irresponsible dominion. The faith critique of the ecological disaster we are making for ourselves is that we have forgotten something about our essential being - namely that we are the managers of the project and our commission is from that creator. We are, that is to say, by our very nature, stewards. It is the first and perhaps most important Biblical word about us.

The story goes on. The Bible is anything but naive about the human role in the drama of creation. Things begin to deteriorate in paradise pretty quickly. In fact, every time I hear about these people who will be living in a self-sufficient, plastic domed bio-sphere for several years, I wonder if they plan to read the first two chapters of Genesis. They really should, every morning.

In any event, things begin to deteriorate and the problem, it seems at first is that Adam and Eve won't abide by the basic rules of the place, want to make the rules themselves apparently. It's pride, mammoth egotism. And of course, church teachers have never been able to resist the possibility that it all has ultimately to do with sex, with the fact that they're walking around in that garden with no clothes on, after all. But, there's another way to look at it, namely that Adam and Eve cop out, are not the responsible agents the creator clearly wants them to be. It's not pride - it's moral laziness, the wonderful theological word for which is "sloth." They don't think too highly of themselves, but not highly enough. The first thing Eve does is let a snake tell her what to do. Adam is a pushover. He does what Eve tells him to do. When they are called to account, he blames her and she blames the snake. [See Apathy, Abdication, and Acadia, in Who's Killing the Church?, p. 112]

Not a bad description of the human condition, 1991. There is a lot of evidence that the real human crisis at the end of the twentieth century is a sudden and remarkably universal abdication of responsibility.

William Raspberry wrote a column, "When Social Conscience Gives Way to Despair," which described a dynamic everyone of us has experienced. Discussing homelessness and the complex reasons for it - the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, the fact that mentally ill persons don't always take their medications on time so become more mentally ill, the fact that government is less and less willing to provide social services and shelter, the fact that there is little profit in low cost urban housing - said Raspberry, "I no longer see it as a problem that's likely to be solved anytime soon and as a result I find it hard to sustain much interest in it. You don't have to be mean to walk away. All it takes is the certainty that nothing can be done" [Chicago Tribune, 9/9/91]

That's what we're doing. We're simply walking away. Did you see the picture in the paper last week of the bulldozer flattening the pathetic shacks of the homeless in New York? On that day it happened I was talking to Peggy Shriver, who lives and works in New York City, who said one of her most vivid memories and worst moments came when she was visiting a third world nation in Africa and witnessed government bulldozers flattening the shacks of poor people. She said she shuddered and wept and thanked God for being an American, a society where something like that would never happen. "Look at what we have become," she said.

Of course, it's complicated and tough and multifaceted. But what we're doing about it, as far as I can see - and about urban crime, poverty, health care, education, is walking away. We can't even do something so absolutely clear and simple as eliminate from our cities, from gangs, from the possession of pathological killers, semi-automatic assault weapons whose sole purpose is to kill as many people as quickly and as efficiently as possible. And we'll walk away from it again, won't we? In fact, the House of Representatives did the day after the massacre in Texas.

Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, in The Struggle for America's Soul, observes the steady decline in the percentage of the population that votes and that in some local elections only five per cent of the eligible voters are going to the polls.

Robert Bellah's new book, The God Society traces our deterioration and refusal to be responsible. America is experiencing a massive failure of civic courage, he says. Voters rebel against taxes necessary for sustaining public services. Politicians encourage the rebellion. The federal government shifts responsibility down to the states. States depend on lotteries and casino gambling schemes to balance the budget and hand it on down to the cities which are chronically broke. One of the most familiar political phenomena is the fiction that public spending must be slashed because there is no money. There is, or course, plenty

of money. We simply are not willing to use it, to be responsible about the life of our nation. We have become, someone wrote recently, "consumers of our own lives."

Instead of the ethics of responsibility, we are more and more willing to live by the politics of blame, and when possible to sue. A Time cover article last summer suggested that we are a nation of blamers, and cited a recent viewing of Walt Disney's "Fantasia" which attracted a half a dozen different protests and pickets, including people who thought that tutu-clad hippos frolicking to the Dance of the Hours were ridiculing the overweight and Fundamentalist Christians who bewailed the depiction of evolution in The Rite of Spring.

Time editorialized that "the victim's passion for blaming everyone except himself - has about it the immobility of addiction," a sentiment echoed by Sam Keen writing about men and men's taking responsibility for their own lives. Keen says that in our zeal to not "blame the victim we have created a sanctuary of victimhood into which both the truly innocent and the truly guilty can retreat...gamblers, drug dealers, sexual harassers, child abusers...victims all. "Is no one responsible?" he asks. "No one guilty? No one to blame? Are we fated to play predestined roles in a techno-economic social system that is stuck on automatic pilot?" [Fire in the Belly, p. 205]

The word of faith for this hour is responsibility. The saving word is that human beings, you and I, have the high and holy calling of God upon us. We are not to be victims, passive observers of gigantic forces far out of our control. We are the stewards, the managers. We are the only managers there are, whether we want to be or not. We are in charge here.

Jesus told a simple little story one time about a man who goes away on a journey and entrusts his property to his servants. In fact, it is the last moral teaching Jesus did before he died and we might conclude that it was a kind of summary of all he said.

You know the story. The man with five talents invested, made five more and was rewarded for his good management. The same thing happened with the man who had two talents. The man who had one talent, hid it, returned it to his master and was unceremoniously thrown off the estate, condemned for his laziness.

The story is about responsibility and it brings this whole matter close to home.

You and I cannot single-handedly solve the problems confronting the world, the nation, the city. But we can, in the name of the creator who gave us dominion, and in the name of Jesus Christ, who calls us to discipleship - we can refuse to

throw up our hands in despair, we can refuse to walk away, refuse to abdicate responsibility. We can continue to protest, complain, argue, telephone, discuss, vote and we can in modest ways work to change things. We can hope and pray and love...without ceasing.

We can shift the basic way we think about our own lives - the talents, skills, the resources, the money we personally have been given - shift from thinking of ourselves as consumers to managers. We are in charge. You are the CEO of your own life. You are responsible.

It's a highly and deeply personal matter finally. "There is a huge space of pain inside each of us - of grief for some life we never led," Ellen Anthony wrote recently. [Weavings, May/June, 1991]

There is a place of pain inside each of us at missed opportunities,

at decisions not made,
gifts not given,
great projects not tried,
high aspirations not attempted,
of love not expressed,
passion not experienced,
devotion not invested,
faith not lived.

It does not have to be. God calls us to life - to dominion - to responsibility - to stewardship.

We are the whole point of the project...hard as it is to say and to understand. We are what God had in mind. We are God's beloved. It is our glory and it is our responsibility.
Amen.